

**EFFECT OF PLACEMENT OF A
"MIDDLE POSITION" ALTERNATIVE**

**By Robert Mason, John E. Carlson, and
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Consumers of public opinion sometimes take reported results at face value, insufficiently aware that seemingly minor variations in question wording or survey technique can cause major differences in public response. A proper understanding of public opinion data requires an awareness of the many ways survey structure, broadly construed, can shape survey findings.

The Research

The experiment John Carlson, Marti McCracken, and I conducted adds to the body of empirical data on response form effects. Specifically, we examined the effect of merely changing the order of response categories in a question that asked people their expectations about the economic situation in Oregon over the next five years. Respondents were given three alternatives: "Conditions will stay the same," and two opposing judgments, "Conditions will get better" and "Conditions will get worse."

Using a split ballot, each of six possible response orders was offered randomly to about 170 respondents each. "Don't know" responses were accepted but dropped from this analysis. The table shows the distribution of answers elicited by each response order combination.

The Results

When the middle alternative ("stay the same") was offered first or last in the list of responses, a "primacy

effect" was evident; that is, the first-mentioned of the two polar alternatives gained relative to the second. At one extreme, "Better" surpasses "Worse" by 10 percentage points; at the other, it trails by 21 points. When, however, the middle position was offered between the polar assessments, it seemed to act as a buffer, preventing one or the other opposing position from gaining as much response-order advantage.

Our question on expectations for the economy almost certainly didn't tap strongly-felt concerns—as do, say, questions on abortion, or police and court response to criminal victimization. The effect we found may well be much greater than we would have gotten were we exploring deeply-held convictions. Moreover, the effect may not be generalized across the population sampled, but instead concentrated among those less sophisticated verbally. Nonetheless, a simple change in the order of response categories in a question otherwise identical yielded entirely different pictures of public sentiment. Order effects of the magnitude shown in the table should be of concern to both practitioners and consumers of survey data. Use of the "middle alternative" as an end-point anchor is common in opinion research. Our experiment suggests that the middle alternative should routinely be placed in the middle of the response set.

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DISTRIBUTIONS FOR EACH OF SIX RESPONSE ORDERS

Response Order	Better	Worse	Better minus Worse	Stay Same	DK/NA
	%	%	%	%	%
(B-W-SS)	41	31	+10	24	4
(SS-B-W)	37	37	0	22	4
(B-SS-W)	36	41	-5	19	4
(W-B-SS)	28	39	-11	29	4
(W-SS-B)	30	43	-13	23	4
(SS-W-B)	26	47	-21	22	5
Total	33	40	-7	23	4

Question: I would like to know how you feel about the economic situation in Oregon over the next five years. Do you feel it will get better, stay the same, or get worse? (responses rotated) B=Better, W= Worse, SS=Stay the Same